

Theosophical perspectives on death and the afterlife

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Section 1.

Introduction

The subject of this article is the discussion of death and the process of dying. Invaluable information will be given about life and death, from Theosophical sources, and a way will be indicated how to verify the given information.

The connecting thread throughout this article will be the concept of man as a stream of life-consciousness, issuing forth from the spiritual realms of life. For an extensive discussion about this concept, I kindly refer the reader to my book "Resonance with the Self", chapter 5 and appendix A, which gives a model of the stream of consciousness and the composite constitution of a human being. This book is available at archive.org

Section 2.

Traditional views of death don't encourage us to think about it

In Western culture death is largely a taboo subject. Most of us don't like to think about the fact that one day we will die. Many people hold to the point of view that we live only once, and that after death there is either an eternal 'heaven' or 'hell' or there is 'nothing' at all.

Both these points of view are something of 'an easy solution'. If we have some fixed prospect then there is no need anymore to think about it..

Philosophically spoken, the concept of 'heaven' and 'hell' as **static** states is a bit childish. Nature herself shows that everything is in a constant change of flux, motion, change. Change is the essence of life.

Plato provides some interesting food for thought in his 'Phaedo'. Socrates argues in that dialogue that everywhere in nature we can observe the play of opposites: day and night, sleeping and waking, life and death, etc.

Regarding the pairs of opposites he notes that everything has the possibility to pass into its opposite state. Every pair of opposites has transitional forms, for example, good and bad have as transitions: getting better and getting worse. Night comes forth out of day via twilight, and day comes forth out of night via dawn. Sleep comes forth out of being awake and being awake out of sleep. With each of these pairs of opposites one can find transitional states or forms.

Moreover, one can understand that these opposites and transitional forms are always **a state of something** and that the appearance of this something is only a transition from one state to another.

If this applies to all pairs of opposites then the question arises whether life and death are also such a pair of opposites. If so, then it would be logical that there are transitional states for life and death too. Death is certainly opposite to manifest life, so let's start searching for transitional states. One gets into life by birth. One gets into the state of death by dying. One can only die because one lives now. Analogously, one can only come into life because one has been dead before.

Conclusion: life and death come forth out of each other and pass into each other via transitional states. A very plausible reasoning indeed! One has only to observe the processes of nature to see endless cycles going on and on. The key question is what is it exactly that is going through these changing states? Answer: it is *consciousness*. Man is consciousness, and specifically gifted with the power of reflection, thinking. The personality (persona means "mask") is a temporary vehicle built by the inner core of the human being, the Self, in order to express itself on the outer planes of life. The higher aspects of thinking can be brought into expression on this outer planes too, thereby providing the means of verifying the truth of reincarnation (see section 7).

Section 3.

Why knowledge of the processes of death is useful

The conclusion of the foregoing section is that any real knowledge of the processes of death is lacking in this world. In fact, we don't understand the meaning of life itself!

Yet, we can find certain clues in some religions as to what happens when we die (see section 6). Since the old Wisdom-tradition was reformulated in Theosophy by H.P. Blavatsky, we are given a lot of valuable knowledge about death and the processes involved. Now, having said that this information is available to this world, this **doesn't** imply blind belief! Rather, Theosophy encourages everybody to investigate the processes of nature and the structure of the universe him/herself. How this can be done is briefly outlined in section 7.

Besides satisfying our curiosity, knowledge of the processes of death is useful because this type of knowledge puts life in a broader context. Life and death are, contrary to how we ordinarily see them, two phases of an ever recurring *type of cycle* in nature: the cycle of manifestation of consciousness on the outer planes of life, followed by the withdrawal of consciousness from the outer into the inner planes of life and vice versa.

This cycle can be described in a general form as:

birth, outer life, death, inner life, reincarnation.

Now, if we proceed from the viewpoint of reincarnation, then naturally the question rises what/how/who will we be in our next life. In what circumstances will we be born? These may seem interesting questions – indeed they are to a certain extent – but the most important question is: what will be our **character** in our next life? Why is this such an important issue? Because our character is a decisive factor, not only regarding which family we will feel attracted to, but also how our entire look upon life will be and how we will live our lives. I tried to explain questions of character and how to refine it, by developing one's higher faculties, in chapter two. The point is, that we ourselves decide *now* what our character will be in our next life! By necessity, our character in its main aspects in our next life cannot differ very much from our character we have build during this lifetime. So we have to work *now* at ourselves, get some feeling for what we really are, deep inside and bring some spiritual light in our character and express it in our life. No one else

will do that for us. You can't buy a wholesome character. The only way to develop it is through selfless service and trying to understand the deep meaning of life and death. One of the 'tricks' is starting to live in the *now*, to just be yourself, dynamically doing what we feel and understand is necessary to do and go on. Don't expect too many fruits of your labor. Your mind will get trapped in expectations (a form of attachment!). If you get a feeling for this, your life will gradually change into a more holistic one. You will feel more connected to the whole, the spiritual world, and to mankind as a whole.. Your appreciation of nature and her wondrous works might raise considerably.

So, knowledge of the processes of death is really knowledge about the processes of Life and is important for our everyday life. As your understanding of the inner states of life and consciousness, and how these connect to daily life, expands, verification of the information that is provided here, and in my other articles, becomes possible. See also section 7.

Section 4.

Man: a stream of consciousness; the composite constitution of man.

In my last book, "Resonance with the Self", one can find a diagram that portrays the composite constitution of the human being. This has been designed by professor G. de Purucker, in order to clarify the connection of the human being with the cosmos. This section, and appendix A in that book, is omitted here in order to streamline the current text. The many technical terms employed there require a deeper study of De Purucker's work. See the bibliography at the end of this chapter.

Section 5.

Death is a gradual process

What happens near the end of our life?

To answer this question we should first of all recognize the fact that we feel a certain attraction to outer life. We want to play our role on the stage of this world. The stream of consciousness manifests itself because there is a certain characteristic within this stream that is attracted to the outer planes of life. If we are honest with ourselves then we can easily be aware of this fact. In the course of life this attraction gets a bit less strong. We have witnessed many events and see a repetition of the same old patterns over and over again, wherever we look. The attraction to the inner planes or states in the stream of consciousness gets stronger for us. Bit by bit we lose the interest in outer life. We start having periods of absentmindedness. The stream of consciousness flashes up and down, so to speak, between the outer and inner planes or states of consciousness. The 'turning point' has been reached for our personal soul.

This period of the lessening of our attraction to outer life usually takes months to perhaps even years, varying with each individual of course.

When the body, the outer vehicle, wears, it will break down in the end. The stream is interrupted. Compare an ordinary light bulb. A similar process is going on there when the wire breaks (a crude analogy). The body is going to disintegrate. This leads us to the consideration of after-death states.

Section 6.

After-death states according to Theosophy

The following info about the process of dying will be a bit sketchy. A mere outline will be given here. I refer the interested reader to the esoteric instructions of Dr. Gottfried the Purucker (lit. #3a) where one can find more details about it.

The last couple of hours before brain-death occurs are spent on the so-called 'panoramic vision'. This is a process that involves the review of the life that is about to end. This review is like an extremely accelerated

movie of all the events of life, seen in the light of the *causes* behind these events. The dying person experiences how others have experienced his or her actions, words, etc. The state of consciousness of the dying is under the influence of the higher Self and is thus able to see and understand the causes behind said events. Besides personal karma, there are other causes as well: familial, tribal, national and global causes.

One could call this panoramic vision a teaching or instruction for the dying human.

After physical death of a person there's the following situation:

1. There is the physical body which is decomposing. The energy field or that part of the aura that is connected with the body is decomposing as well.
2. The personal consciousness remains temporarily located in a configuration that can be called a "desire body". In general, the human personality is characterized by desire-thinking. This comprises forces or energies that cannot be lost. Conservation of energy applies to these energies as well. Transformation or utilization of force into other directions is possible, and is dealt with in chapter two of this book.

After physical death, the force of desire binds human consciousness to said configuration. This will terminate when the deceased has liberated himself or herself from earthly desires that still bind him or her to this world.

Now, where is this configuration to be found? Obviously not in the material world. It is in a place that the Roman Catholics call purgatory. The Greeks called it Hades; the ancient Egyptians called it Amenti (see [Egyptian book of the Dead](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_the_Dead) - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_the_Dead), the Tibetans call this the Bardo.

The human being determines the duration of this state by the way he or she lives his or her life now! If one leads a spiritual life, serving one's community, then one will have a short stay in the Bardo. This can vary, say, from a couple of days to a couple of weeks.

If one lives otherwise, paying a lot of attention to personal status, filled with selfish ambitions, and paying little attention to the needs of others, then one will have a much longer stay in the Bardo.

When the deceased has liberated himself or herself from the lower desires, then the *second death* occurs. This implies the absorption of the higher aspirations (higher desires) and noble qualities into the field of the higher Self (or spiritual part of our being). Remember that the higher Self is the spiritual parent of the personality.

This marks the end of the Bardo state for the deceased.

The spiritual and intellectual qualities and noble aspirations are precisely what remains of the deceased. Sometimes, these qualities and energies are called “the spiritual aroma” and that is what enters a new state of consciousness.

This is an exalted dreamy state of spiritual fulfillment [1] of all the ideals the person has cherished during lifetime. This can also be seen as a kind of reward for undeserved suffering on earth for this person. These sufferings stems to a large degree from the consequence of **collective** deeds and thoughts of the human race. From the point of view of the personality, these miseries are not deserved. Yet, being part of humanity, one cannot escape all the stupidities and violence in this world. Of course this includes one's own follies as well.

What has remained of the personality is now dream-sleeping in the bosom of the spirit or higher Self. This sleep can continue for centuries. In its next earthly life the reincarnated person will commence with an improved character.

All the ancient peoples of the world believed in the reality of reincarnation

(<https://web.archive.org/web/19970216022250/http://www.spiritweb.org:80/Spirit/reincarnation.html>) and a majority in this world still does.

Buddhists, Hindus, Druids, Celts, Britons, Gallics, Platonists, Pythagoreans, many gnostic Christians, are only some of the people that hold to this doctrine.

Add to this the Inca and Maya civilizations, the old Egyptians, the Roman poets Vergil, Lucretius, Horatio, the Stoics, and the list is still not completed! Also the Jewish Sohar, the famous Kabbalistic book, contains references to reincarnation.

The Christian Bible contains some implicit references to this doctrine. See the gospel of John(9). The famous church father Origenes was very familiar with this doctrine. Eusebius was one of the church fathers who helped to eliminate the doctrine of

reincarnation from the Christian faith (which was more a sort of collection of sects). Needless to say that Nature doesn't go along with this decision.

Reincarnation is the 'lost thread' in our society.

Understanding this key to life, together with that of Karma, would change fundamentally the way we live. It would bring some order in this chaotic world, if properly understood.

One question about reincarnation, namely: 'why don't we remember our past lives?' can be shortly answered here. The point is that we get a new brain in our new life. This new brain doesn't hold the memories of the past lives.

What happens to the desire-body, the configuration that arises after physical death? After the second death, it slowly disintegrates as well. It leaves impressions, seeds, in the astral matrix (see chapter two) that will be activated in the next life of the reincarnating individual.

Section 7.

How can we verify the given information ourselves?

A pertinent question to ask is: 'How do you know all this?' or 'How do you know this information is correct?' Is it only from books or teachers?

Well, sure we have information from the great Teachers of mankind, but this is not enough. Everybody can experience the value and truth of these teachings for themselves! Remember, we ARE the stream of consciousness. We can shift our center of consciousness from personal to more spiritual. We can use our faculty of thinking in such a way as to become more transparent for the inner light that is called *understanding* (the Enlightenment-principle).

Dr. Gottfried de Purucker gives an important indication of this in his work "The Source of Occultism [*esoterism*, ed.]". He says:

"Meditation is holding a thought in the mind and allowing the consciousness to work inwardly with this thought in a joyful and easy

way."

"The right way to meditate is to cherish a noble thought, a beautiful thought, a helpful thought, and keep it in the mind in such a way that it becomes a pleasure. Love this thought. Keep it in the mind. Let it dwell there. Let the mind brood on it as a hen broods on its eggs and chicks. There is no need to use the physical or personal, psychic, will. If one does, one will not succeed because such an exercise of will means effort and exerts pressure. That is not the right way to meditate. Cherish a clean thought and keep it in mind, keep it [dynamically] in the mind; this is meditation and if one practices this simple rule of Jnana-yoga [6] then this becomes a natural thing after some time. It becomes a part of your daily consciousness. Often you will hardly realize that you are thinking this thought. It will always be there in the back of your mind. That is meditation, and concentration is to periodically, when you have the time, to admit this thought more clearly and more fully into the consciousness and direct all your attention to it, not with the will, but with ease."

[6] From Wikipedia: Jñāna-yoga (pronounced dznjana joga) is one of the main branches of yoga and is already described in the ancient Upanishads, the philosophical portions of the Vedas that form the written basis of Hinduism. Jñāna-yoga is best translated as 'the way of direct insight through self-knowledge'. This way is mainly philosophical in nature (compare it with the word gnosis related to jñāna), but, contrary to what is usually understood in the West by philosophy, not speculative, but experimental. Jñāna-yoga searches on spiritual-philosophical grounds for a liberation from the world of joy and sorrow, success and failure, birth and death, good and evil, etc. The approach of jñāna-yoga is rational-experimental and as such not based on any religion, belief or doctrine.

Dr. De Purucker further states, that this type of meditation is the fundamental secret of yoga: unity of the mind with the unspeakable tranquility, wisdom and love of the god within. This is very valuable advice! One will then gradually start to experience more continuity of consciousness in one's sleep.

Of course, we have to practice brotherhood/sisterhood, try to realize at least a bit of our highest ideals. That will change the characteristics of our consciousness. Brotherhood/Sisterhood/Siblinghood is not so much about

being nice to each other. Rather it has to do with respect for the uniqueness of other beings and trying to learn something from each other!

We can learn something from the other when we try to **identify** ourselves with the essence of the other, using our empathic faculty (an aspect of the faculty of understanding!) So, our relationships with other people are deeply involved here. While spiritual growth processes can be painful sometimes, one reason being the immense resistance we encounter in ourselves (and others), it is beautiful too! We will experience more depth, warmth, humanness, less automaticity, etc. in our relations with others. Of course, sometimes we will have inner struggles, and, who knows, outer struggles too. All worthwhile things must be conquered!

A critical investigation and verification is always necessary regarding esoteric teachings. I myself would never just accept teachings from others without applying my best powers of philosophical scrutiny and without testing these teachings in my own life. This testing involves the becoming familiar with one's own composite constitution and its relation with nature, the world.

The old Wisdom-Religion[6] provides pointers on the spiritual path. It is for the self-chosen, self-elected, to start their journey along the path, a path that is defined, characterized, by the **motive** of the seeker.

[6] As indicates in a previous footnote, I largely, but not exclusively, portray the work of teachers of the Point Loma theosophical tradition. More of my work can be found at archive.org, like my book "[Rediscovering Transcendence](#)".

Bibliography

Note: many publications can be found in the [online archive of Theosophical University Press](#)

(<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/ts/tup-onl.htm>), like G. de Purucker's "Fountain source of occultism" [occult: that which is hidden to the profane eye], which is an amazing treasure trove of information about esoteric issues.

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Martin Euser received his Masters degree in Clinical Psychology and his Bachelor's degree in Theoretical Physics from the Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He worked at this university as a teacher in statistics and courseware developer, and later as an internet developer at several companies. He has published many articles on esoterism, spirituality and psychology and made old texts (Jacob Boehme, Proclus) available as free ebooks in the archive.org internet archive and on academia.edu. New articles of his are also published there. As a researcher on the links between science, psychology and spirit, he views a spiritual form of psycho-cybernetics as a promising candidate for furnishing such a link.